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A DAY NOT SEIZED? : Citizen Activism and the New Political Reality

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Introduction

THIS is, to coin a phrase, (the best and the worst of times) for South African activists seeking to use citizen's organisations to create a fairer society. It is the best because the opportunities for effective action may never have been greater. It is the worst, because current patterns suggest that it is unlikely that activists and their organisations are able to take advantage.

Ironically, the cause of both the opportunity and (much of) the incapacity are the same: the unpopularity among growing numbers of voters, particularly but by no means only in the major cities, of the governing party's current leadership. One effect has been to force government – and politicians in general – to take more notice of citizens than they have done in the past. This opens opportunities for citizen influence, particularly where it seeks to give voice to the realities of people who are usually denied a voice. Another has been a strong tendency for activism to centre far less on policy change and far more on the governing party and its actions. Coupled with a sharp decline in organisational strength in important parts of civil society, and a failure thus far to see the new political reality as an opportunity, this has left activists ill equipped to use these opportunities to secure much-need change.

The Opportunity: The Impact of August 3 2016, the local government elections

The role of electoral politics in strengthening or weakening the influence of citizen activism is often under-valued. Social movements and civil society organisations are frequently seen as an alternative which renders political parties irrelevant. This ignores the extent to which party politics can provide, or close off, opportunities for citizen influence – not because parties are necessarily vehicles of people's aspirations, but because competition between parties creates opportunities for activist influence. Thus, a multi-country study of citizen action to achieve national policy change found that in each case, electoral politics exerted an influence on activism's chances of success (Gaventa and McGee, 2010). Partha Chatterjee has shown how Indian slum-dwellers' organisations effectively engage with parties to enhance their influence (Chatterjee, 2004), something they would not be able to do if there was no electoral competition which gave parties an incentive to listen to them in the hope of winning votes. This confirms the common sense logic which holds that electoral competition is favourable for citizen influence because it means that politicians are forced to take citizen opinion more seriously when they are competing for votes than when electoral results are predictable.

Because not all citizens want the same policies – and citizens' organisations obviously press for conflicting policies – this clearly does not mean that all citizens' organisations are assured that politicians will listen to them in the hope of winning votes: they might expect more votes if they support the opposing view. But it does mean that, where organisations can convince politicians that they enjoy substantial public support, the chances that they will be taken seriously are greatly improved if parties cannot take re-election for granted. In theory at least, that section of civil society which is discussed here – that which seeks a greater voice for those who are not heard – should be in a strong position to do this since the voiceless vastly outnumber those who can speak.

This background helps explain why August's 2016 local government local election results have created a unique opportunity for activism in South Africa. For the first time since 1994, the governing party's share of the vote declined enough to ensure that the outcome of the next general election, in 2019, is uncertain. The ANC received 54 percent of the vote in the August's 2016 local government local election and its share dropped by 8 percentage points in two years (since the 2014 general election). If that decline repeats itself in 2019, the ANC's vote will drop below 50%. This clearly creates a new political terrain, not only for the governing party but for all parties.

For the past two decades, democratic politics has been a process in which politicians across the board have been insulated from voter pressure. The ANC could take re-election for granted and so the opinions of party activists mattered far more than those of voters. This clearly made activism more difficult, except in those rare cases in which parties were competing for votes – it is no accident that, during the fight for comprehensive treatment for people living with HIV and AIDS, provincial governments were most sympathetic in KwaZulu Natal and Western Cape, where the outcome of

elections was in doubt. (Friedman in Gaventa and McGee, 2010). But it is not only the ANC which has to revise its way of operating – the other parties are also forced now to think of how to maximise their vote to take advantage of the ANC's declining support. The stakes have been raised and the costs for all parties of ignoring citizens have grown. This should open up new opportunities for citizen influence.

In two major metropolitan areas, Joburg and Tshwane, the changes - and the opportunities they present - are clearest. Both cities are now governed by minority governments. This means that the city government cannot make decisions unless it can persuade other parties to vote with it – every issue is thus in the balance and so open to influence. In Joburg, for example, the mayor had to backtrack on a plan to restructure waste removal after it became clear that other parties had the votes to block this (Makhafola, 2016). So, if activists can persuade parties outside government not to support a particular idea, they would be able to block any council action which they oppose. Similarly, if they can assemble a majority of councillors in their favour by lobbying the parties, they can instruct the city government to do whatever they wish it to do. This opens an unprecedented opportunity for activists and organisations who are able to take advantage by mobilising support for their ideas and who can convince political parties that they will gain votes by backing their proposals.

Elsewhere in the country, activists do not have the same opportunity to influence decisions directly but here too the terrain has changed: politicians everywhere and in all the spheres of government must now take voters more seriously and this means that well thought out campaigns should have more influence than ever before. It is worth reiterating that this does not mean that all campaigns are more likely to succeed: politicians will be calculating what will win them support among their likely voters and this will influence what they are willing to support. Civil society activists also tend at times to forget that one of the key features of civil society is its diversity – it provides a platform for those who support human rights and a more equal society, but also for those who oppose both. In a more fluid environment in which politicians need to win and retain votes, both sides will have new opportunities for influence and the outcome on any particular issue is not guaranteed. The key point, however, is that organisations which can mobilise widespread support for their campaigns and who have an effective strategy for influencing decisions should now wield more influence.

It is important to stress that the chief beneficiaries of the change should, in theory, be organisations which speak for grassroots citizens – the poor and those who are usually excluded from the debate. The affluent and the organisations which represent them, usually do not need political openings to exert influence: they do so as a matter of routine. Whatever the balance of power between parties, governments do tend to listen to business, professional and even trade union lobbies. Votes are not the only consideration for elected governments: they also need to take those interest groups which are pivotal to the economy seriously if they want to govern effectively (Lindblom, 1978). Grassroots citizens have no such advantage; they must rely on their numbers. When politicians do not need to worry about votes they do not have to worry much about the poor and the marginalised. The more

they do have to worry about votes, the more possible it becomes for the previously ignored to enter the debate.

But these changes have only unlocked a potential – they do not ensure that activists and organisations are in a position to take advantage of them. And there is evidence that civil society organisations are not equipped to make effective use of the openings which have emerged.

A Moment Not Seized?

There are broadly two reasons for doubting whether civil society organisations – particularly those who speak for people at the grassroots - are in any shape to take advantage of the new opportunities.

First, strategies and attitudes seem ill-equipped for the task. The most obvious reason is the newness of the terrain – activists are not used to operating in this environment. With some important exceptions, particularly the Treatment Action Campaign's battle for comprehensive treatment (Friedman and Mottiar, 2006), the dominant mode of engagement by those in civil society who seek to highlight the rights and needs of the poor has assumed that, because the government has claimed to support these goals, the 'natural' mode of engagement is one in which government and civil society work together towards common goals. When this does not happen – and it usually does not – the result is not more effective strategy but a complaint that the government has abandoned civil society (Friedman 2011). The new climate requires an approach much like that which Chatterjee describes – one in which activists see politicians of all parties as a strategic challenge rather than a natural ally or opponent – and so devise ways of turning party competition to their advantage. It also requires an approach which relies on winning widespread grassroots support rather than appealing to the government. This section of civil society has shallow roots among the poor – one sign may be its opposition to e-tolls which tax car owners so that the poor can travel on highways free of charge, a campaign against e-tolls is therefore unlikely to enjoy broad support amongst grassroots citizens - and this campaign would need to change this, if it is to convince politicians that it speaks for many voters.

One symptom of this tendency to see engagement with the government as the way to civil society influence is a pattern in which much activity is devoted not to fighting for social change, but to demanding a change in government leadership. Thus a strong campaign theme has been the demand that President Jacob Zuma be removed. While the President may well be an obstacle to a concerted attempt to pursue social equity, the myriad problems the society faces – poverty, inequality, the persistence of more subtle forms of racism – are unlikely to disappear if he does leave office. And yet this campaign – or variants of it such as anti-corruption campaigns aimed primarily at politicians and government officials – has often seemed to replace all other social justice concerns. The point may be illustrated by the fact that the trade union campaign for a national minimum wage has not been taken up by civil society and so has not become a goal around which citizens have rallied –

which may partly explain why negotiations on this issue are apparently in a stalemate (Bisseker, 2016). While the campaign against university fees may seem to be an exception, it has, despite the dramatic headlines it has attracted, remained a campus movement rather than a broad civil society campaign.

The second reason for scepticism is the inability of social justice campaigners to mobilise significant numbers of citizens. The Zuma Must Fall and anti-corruption campaigns have failed to rally mass support – marches have attracted a few thousand people at most while other events have attracted only a few dozen. Perhaps the most noticeable sign of a failure to mobilise is the experience thus far of the nascent trade union federation and social movement launched by the National Union of Metalworkers (Numsa) and former Cosatu general secretary Zwelinzima Vavi. While much was expected of this initiative, its only mass event for 2016, was a May Day rally in Gauteng to demonstrate support for a new federation which incidentally failed to fill a stadium which accommodates 20 000 people (World News 2016). This is a far cry from the large numbers which the unions were once able to mobilise: to put it in perspective, Numsa's membership exceeds 300 000, so only a tiny sliver of the union's members were prepared to turn out to show their support.

While attendance at meetings is not a sure guide to support, it does say something important about movements' ability to capture the public imagination – and to mobilise supporters. It may also be significant that the United Front launched by Numsa fielded candidates in the Nelson Mandela Bay municipality local elections of August 2016, and was able to win only one proportional representation seat. This seems to offer further evidence that this movement has failed to build support on the ground – if the union movement, an historic source of mobilisation, cannot mobilise support, it is hard to imagine civil society organisations with much smaller memberships doing this. The harsh reality may well be that social justice campaigning has been reduced to a social media activity rather than a lived reality on the country's streets.

Civil society organisations who want greater equality appear, therefore, to be entering the new environment with no strategies to take advantage of the new openings. They also appear to bear little capacity to mobilise citizens in support of their campaigns. Unless this changes, the new opportunities are likely to be used largely by the affluent and connected groups who do not need to mobilise public support – in which case it will create opportunities for elites rather than grassroots citizens. So the opportunities for civil society activity to achieve a fairer society may have never been as great – but the price of failing to make the changes needed to wield influence may never have been as high.

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